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And McCone Was Back Home

STATINTL

It is indicative of the gross incompetence of American officialdom in Viet Nam that when the three-month-old regime of Premier Tran Van Huong fell yesterday, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor was in Bangkok. How was he to know? Certainly the Central Intelligence Agency couldn't have told him.

On Wednesday morning, a few hours before the coup in Saigon, CIA Director John McCone appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to "explain" the situation in Southeast Asia. Afterward, he was silent (as befits the head of an intelligence agency) when questioned by reporters. Senator Fulbright, chairman of the committee, was not.

Mr. McCone, the senator informed the press, had assured the committee that there did not appear to be any immediate danger to the Huong regime, despite intensified Buddhist demonstrations and a renewal of the suicides that preceded the overthrow of the Diem government. Beyond question, Senator Fulbright's report of the testimony was correct. Mr. McCone had said that, and it is obvious — and frightening — that he believed it.

The State Department was equally befogged. As the conspirators set in motion their plot, Mr. Taylor con-

ferred with officials in Laos and Thailand. The mind's eye pictures Mr. Taylor receiving word of the coup, possibly on the late news, and dashing off toward Saigon like the rabbit in Alice, pulling out his watch and wondering if he will make it before this government, too, is deposed.

As our columnist Henry Taylor is fond of goading when the government finds egg on its face, Surprise! Surprise! And what a needless surprise it was. Six weeks ago even the New York Times could see what was coming. In a dispatch from Saigon, Times Correspondent Peter Grose summed up the danger in this fashion:

"The Viet Cong leadership," he reported, "has intensified its program lately to smuggle agents provocateur into Saigon and mobilize sympathizers to exploit unrest and demonstrations such as occurred last week (in late November)."

The first phase of this effort, Mr. Grose said, called for the establishment in Saigon of arms caches and "safe zones" where agents, and even military personnel, could gather "secretly or in the guise of youths or workers" in preparation for full-scale revolt.

The second phase, as shown by captured Viet Cong documents, called for efforts "to get people out into the streets." The quotation is

from the captured documents. "The instructions stress the desirability of violence and serious injuries — even deaths—to produce martyrs and a focus for further resentment," according to Mr. Grose. In short, these documents were the blueprint for just what has been happening in Saigon for the last several weeks: mob scenes, inflammatory sloganeering, hysterical Buddhists calling for renewed suicides — in response to which plea a 17-year-old girl took her life the day before Wednesday's coup.

This does not mean, of course, that the new government is a Communist government. General Khanh, though disliked by our people in Saigon, is quite loyal. Unfortunately, General Khanh and his predecessors and their predecessors — all the way back to Diem — are unwitting pieces of the Communist design: to create such political chaos in Saigon that the war effort will collapse. Wednesday's coup was the seventh since Diem, and the war has gone from bad to worse. Unless some stability is achieved, the Communists will overrun Southeast Asia, and even the CIA must know it.